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All-out battle waged over gay rights

By **Dave Curtin**
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Kevin remembers watching television as a child, always seeing a man and woman together, always a hero and heroine. As he watched, he imagined himself with a partner someday.

"But in my imagination, my partner was always a man," says Kevin, now 28.

Like most people, he dreamed of marriage, a house and a good job. Recently he bought a house with his male lover.

But as a wide-eyed child watching his heroes on television, he never dreamed he would grow up in an often-hostile society in which some people see him as a sexual deviant.

In October, Kevin was fired from his job of four years at a Colorado Springs bank. He claims he lost his job because he is gay.

"I had advanced to lead teller, worked as a supervisor and had nothing but compliments and good reviews," he said. "Without cause I was fired with the notice that my performance was unsatisfactory and I had chronic problems. When my attorney asked for proof, there was nothing but documentation that I was a good employee. Yet, my attorney told me there was nothing he could do."

Kevin says he still would have his $23,000-a-year job if discrimination against gays were outlawed. As it is, he doesn't want to reveal his last name because he's still looking for work and fears his sexual preference will be held against him.

The state and the city are considering laws that would protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in employment, housing and public facilities. Now, gays say, they have no recourse if they are barred from renting an apartment or are fired from a job because of their sexual preference.

The Colorado Civil Rights Commission will hear comment Tuesday on whether the state should extend its equal-protection statute to include gays and lesbians. It plans to make a recommendation to the Legislature next month; no proposal has been written yet. A proposed state law toughening the penalties for violence against minorities — including gay citizens — died in the Legislature recently.

The Colorado Springs Human Relations Commission plans to propose next month an ordinance outlawing discrimination based on sexual preference, race, religion, age, gender and physical or mental handicap. If the City Council approves it, Colorado Springs would join Denver, where a gay-rights law went into effect this month.

The question of civil rights for gays has erupted into an emotional firestorm with both sides — gays and opponents to gay rights — saying they have received threatening phone calls.

The bitter issue has escalated from an argument over whether a certain group of people is entitled to such rights into a battle over the morality or immorality of a lifestyle. In this war of words, there are no easy answers, no hard and fast truths. It boils down to widely divergent perceptions of right and wrong.

FACT-FINDING HEARING

The Colorado Civil Rights Commission will hold a public fact-finding hearing on the gay rights issue at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the City Council Chambers, City Administration Building, Room 102, 30 S. Nevada Ave. People who wish to speak should sign up a half-hour before the meeting begins. For more information, call 1-800-262-4845.

Opponents of proposal call gay rights law bad public policy

Arguments against gay-rights legislation range from the simple to the strident. Some are rooted in health concerns, others in the Bible.

Some opponents say it's all part of a gay agenda to remake straight America — to recondition a country's values

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and beliefs. Gay rights is bad public policy, the say, resulting in reverse discrimination and hideous punishments for innocent bystanders who have a moral conscience.

And if society decides to grant equal rights based on chosen behavior, are its members also required to give jobs and rent homes to alcoholics, smokers, heavy-metal rockers and left-handed people? Granting civil rights to people on such tenuous grounds is not an advancement of civil rights, opponents say, but a danger to minorities who need them.

To support their claim of reverse discrimination, gay-rights opponents offer examples like that of college roommates Ann Hacklander and Maureen Rowe of Madison, Wis., who decided they did not want Cari Sprague as a roommate in 1989.

The women told Sprague they would be uncomfortable living with a lesbian. In doing so, they broke a municipal law banning housing discrimination.

When Sprague complained to the city's Equal Opportunity Commission, the women were fined $1,500 and ordered to attend a two-hour training class conducted by a gay organization. Their housing situation was to be monitored for two years by the commission.

But gay-rights proponents say a similar incident could not happen here because the Colorado Springs proposal does not extend to the sharing of one's own living space.

Opponents also cite the case of the Boy Scouts, which has a national policy barring gays from becoming Scout leaders. The organization recently lost a round in California Superior Court after Timothy Curran, a 29-year-old television editor and former Scout, challenged the policy.

The Scouts had contended that gays are not proper role models for youths and that the organization has a constitutional right to determine its leadership qualifications.

The judge, however, ruled the Scouts are a business and therefore subject to California's civil-rights act forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, race, religion or disability.

The plight of the Wisconsin roommates and the Boy Scouts are part of a homosexual agenda to change America's values and belief systems, said the Rev. Louis Sheldon, chairman of the California-based lobby organization Traditional Values Coalition, which will be represented at the hearing in Colorado Springs on Tuesday.

Ammunition includes Supreme Court decision, health statistics and religious teachings

Some opponents contend that granting civil rights protections to gays would set a dangerous precedent, ultimately leading to protections for anyone with their own brand of sexual gratification.

If gays are granted such rights, "what reason do we have to deny the same status to pedophiles, bestialists, necrophiliacs?" asked Tony Marco, who said he speaks for a Colorado Springs ad hoc committee of church members and business leaders that numbers 600 people.

To back up that concern, gay-rights opponents cite a 1986 U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding Georgia's sodomy law. In Bowers vs. Hardwick, the court said it was unwilling to declare a fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy, adding that if it did, it would be hard-pressed to deny people with their own brand of sexual behavior special protection under the law.

Supreme Court Judge Byron White wrote in his majority opinion: "It would be difficult . . . to limit the claimed right to homosexual conduct while leaving exposed to prosecution adultery, incest and other sexual crimes even though they are committed in the home."

Marco contends civil rights have always been granted "on the basis of unchangeable characteristics of birth, like race, color, gender or national origin," with special protection also extended to the physically handicapped.

"For this state to award physical behavior pure and simple — even behavior that is shared by many people, even behavior that may be innate and unchangeable — ethnic status would make no sense."

Opponents also cite health concerns. How can society reward equal-rights status to its most persistent communicators of sexually transmitted diseases, they ask.

And some opposition stems from religious beliefs. Homosexuality is immorality, said the Rev. Ted Haggard, pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado Springs and president of the Association of Evangelicals.

"We think sexuality is designed by God and that is it is good," Haggard said. "It's for joy, marriage and reproduction. God created sexuality to be part of mankind, but if we abuse it, we have to be willing to face the consequences. We don't mind discrimination against a rapist for example. That's a misuse of sexuality."

'When suddenly you're a minority, it wakes you up.'

While gay-rights opponents rely on Supreme Court decisions, health statistics and even the Bible for their ammunition, Colorado Springs gays — and their families — speak from the heart. They see discrimination first-hand, they say.

The gay community appeals to the public's sensibilities. They dismiss opponents' arguments as irrational. They say antiquated stereotypes — that gays are child molesters, that all gays have AIDS — are among the types of discrimination they are fighting.

"A person's adult sexuality has nothing to do with criminal sexual behavior," said Robin Miller, a Colorado Springs lawyer and lesbian who helped write a draft of the city's proposed ordinance. "There's absolutely no connection between a person's sexuality — heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual — and abhorrent behavior toward children."

Gays also appeal to the public's conscience. How could any person in good conscience oppose basic human rights for all people, they ask. Gays are forced to live a lie, hiding their sexuality out of fear of losing their jobs or getting kicked out of their homes. Denying gays rights is displaying the same prejudice exhibited against racial minorities in the 1950s and '60s, they say.

"They're just human beings like you and me," said the mother of a 31-year-old gay man.

"They deserve the same rights you and I have. They're a very loving, very kind people, and the public opinion of them stinks. People who haven't been around gays throw up all the little cliches."

The mother of a 21-year-old gay man found that out last spring when her son revealed his long-kept secret.

"First I cried, then I told him I loved him and I was proud of him for coming out of the closet," she said. "It's not so much a question of gay rights as much as a question of doing what's right for all groups of people. Discrimination on any front is abhorrent.

"Of all the things — the hopes and desires you have as a parent — this is not something I would have chosen," she said. "But now that it's part of my life, I've found I've opened my heart and mind to other groups of people. When suddenly you're a minority, it wakes you up."

Public policy can't allow bigotry, says backer of legislation

Equal opportunities for employment and housing are basic human rights, said lawyer Miller.

"Anti-gay bigots want us to remain illegitimate and invisible," she said. "Employment, housing and public accommodations are inherently public by their nature and must be open to members of the public. Individuals are not to bring their biases into those areas. They are entitled to their private biases, but they cannot act on them — whether it be against gay people, black people or Jewish people."

Alan Cook, a gay psychotherapist, said the primary discrimination is in employment. "Fear of disclosure and recrimination," he said. "That's what hits the hardest.

"I think a law is needed to help gay people feel less afraid, and straight people understand them just like black people or older people or disabled people," Cook said. "The incidence of adolescent suicide based on sexuality is rising, and anti-discrimination laws could be a start toward stemming that."

Miller said five of the city's top 16 private employers have anti-discrimination policies that include protections for gay employees: Digital Equipment, Schlage Lock Co., U S West, Safeway and Shepard's/McGraw-Hill.

Colorado College's non-discrimination policy "has had only positive consequences," said Margaret Duncombe, chairperson of the sociology department and faculty adviser to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance. "It allows gay and lesbian people to be more comfortable in their work and studies. They're not investing energy in hiding or creating cover stories."

And the schools' anti-discrimination policy works both ways, she says.

"As a lesbian faculty member, they would not want me to discriminate against my heterosexual students. The anti-discrimination policy constrains my behavior as well as those who would discriminate against gays."

Ironically, the gay activists glean support from the same Bowers vs. Hardwick Supreme Court decision that their opponents rely so heavily on.

In a bristling dissent, Justice Harry Blackmun took the unusual step of reading his opinion from the bench and announced: "The fact that individuals define themselves in a significant way through their intimate sexual relationships with others suggests — in a nation as diverse as ours — that there may be many 'right' ways of conducting those relationships."

OPPOSING VIEWS

AGAINST THE PROPOSAL

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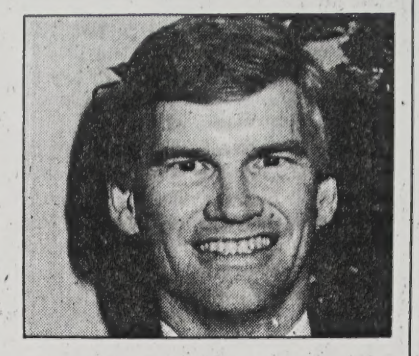

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